

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum

Sunni – Shi'a Reconciliation

February 13, 2007

This month's Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum focused on Sunni- Shi'a reconciliation. The panelist discussed the historical perspectives of the conflict, present-day issues, and viable processes for moving toward deep and meaningful reconciliation. The panelist included Dr. Jamal Barzinji, Director and Founder of the International Institute for Islamic Thought, Mohammad Faghfoory, Professor at George Washington University, and Imam Abolfazl B. Nahidian, Founder, Director and Imam of the Manassas Mosque. The discussion was facilitated by Joseph Montville from the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a founding member of the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum. One of the CPRF's special guests was H.E. Samir Sumaidaie, Iraq's ambassador to the US (pictured). The event began with a recitation from the Quran, performed by Fareez Ahmed and Sana Farid of Search for Common Ground.



The speakers expressed their gratitude for the gathering and for the opportunity to engage in dialogue on the topic of Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation. The conversation focused on the historical relationship between Sunni and Shi'a, present day misunderstandings between the groups as well as opportunities for reconciliation, and the situation between the two groups in Iraq. Mr. Muhammad Faghfoory was the first speaker to present. Mr. Faghfoory began by expressing his dismay that it takes a tragedy to motivate people to begin talking to one another. He clarified that the focus should not only be on the reconciliation of Sunni and Shi'a, but on the reconciliation of Muslims and non-Muslims and reconciliation between the East and West. Mr. Faghfoory stated that there is a misconception about the division between the Sunni and the Shi'a. He believes, as do the other panelist that the groups are not as divided as the media and powerful political players make them out to be. In fact, Mr. Faghfoory explained that Muslims, whether Sunni or Shi'a, adhere to the two major principles of Islam, these being: there is one God and only one God and the principle of complete devotion and recognition of the Prophet Mohammed. Mr. Faghfoory pointed out that Muslims everywhere have the same prayers and they make the same pilgrimages.

Mr. Faghfoory continued by stating that on most issues Sunni and Shi'a are not divided theologically, but he feels that the media and political leaders divide and exploit the two sects. He also feels that Muslims allow the exploitation of their differences. Mr. Faghfoory expressed that those differences that do exist are not as divisive as believed – certainly not enough to cause the vast amount of confrontations that take place in the name of these differences; and they are not cause for wars. Mr. Faghfoory, along with the other panelist, believes that these confrontations and wars are the result of politics and power grabs that use religion and the Sunni-Shi'a divide as a weapon to divide and

conquer people. He stated that at no time in history have these differences lead one group to call the other “unbelievers” as they do today.

Mr. Faghfoory gave an overview of the relationship between the Shia’ and Sunni throughout history. He pointed out that even when leaders have tried to exaggerate or exploit the differences between the two sects, there were rarely conflicts between the two groups in the society at large and he explained that when there were clashes, they did not take on religious tones. Mr. Faghfoory explained that in Iraq, when the British tried to “play” the Sunnis against the Shi’a, it never proved a successful tactic. Mr. Faghfoory also emphasized the connection that both the Sunnis and Shi’a have to the land. Thus, Mr. Faghfoory clarified, the people of Iraq think of themselves as Iraqis – as people of the land. Mr. Faghfoory went on to give the example of when Iraq invaded Iran the Shi’a did not side with Iran as many had thought they would; they stayed loyal to their land.

Mr. Faghfoory relayed that many of the problems today stem from the fact that the Shi’a population, despite being numerous in many countries, remains much poorer than their Sunni counterparts and less educated. For example, as a result of various wars and violence, there are many Shi’a living as refugees in camps – landless – and therefore disenfranchised. Mr. Faghfoory pointed out that the more disenfranchised people are, the less they are able to focus on reconciliation and peace. However, historically, Sunni and Shi’a were engaged in dialogue with one another, but today these dialogues are seen and heard less and less. Mr. Faghfoory stated that even though the majority of Sunni and Shi’a condemn the violence, their voices are somehow silenced. He explained that these voices of reason – those calling for co-existence – must be awakened; Mr. Faghfoory believes there must be an effort to revive the Islamic tradition of dialogue. Mr. Faghfoory ended with the idea that even if complete tolerance for the ‘other’ is not achievable today, there must be a commitment to the children of the future.

Dr. Barzinji echoed much of what had been stated by Mr. Faghfoory. He claimed that Shi’a and Sunni agree on the important teachings of the religion. He explained that in previous times Iraq was able to sustain a great deal of pluralism and that the obstacles that have faced (and are facing) the Iraqi people—and Sunnis and Shi’a everywhere – have been and are instigated by outside powers. Dr. Barzinji recounted the many times throughout history when outside forces invaded Iraq and tried to exploit the very existence of two sects of Muslims living in the same country. Dr. Barzinji continued by stating that these forces – these occupiers – tried to turn one group against another in order to gain power and in order to keep it. Today in Iraq, Dr. Barzinji says, the United States is the occupier and he believes that the “volatile state and uncertainty the country is experiencing has to do almost entirely with the fact that it is being occupied; more so than any real deep differences between the two sects”. Dr. Barzinji said that even the *idea* of such a division is new to the Iraqi people; and the fact that over thirty percent of families in Iraq are intermarried supports this point.

Dr. Barzinji addressed several steps that he feels must be taken in order to move toward a reconciliation of the Sunni and Shi’a. He began by stating that the number of elders, those who remember the tradition of inter-sectarian dialogue, is diminishing. Dr.

Barzinji believes that in order to revive this tradition people must start listening to those individuals who know and remember the advantages of the tradition. He believes that the uniting force of the two sects is religion; thus, people must work to understand that being a Muslim is the unifying force. Therefore, he believes, the entire debate about the split between the two sects must be restructured. In addition, there must be a restructuring of the Iraqi government. Dr. Barzinji demanded the cessation of ethnic cleansing and the trauma caused by these atrocious acts of violence. He also stated that those individuals and communities whom have been displaced throughout the last several decades must be reintegrated into their homeland. Corruption must be faced and eliminated. The United States must announce a timetable for withdrawal; once this takes place, Dr. Barzinji believes there will be an opportunity for powerful reconciliation. But, he also believes that the United States cannot just “pull-out”; there must be a dedication to creating security on the ground and this should be done in *partnership* with other regional powers.

Dr. Barzinji continued with the steps he feels are imperative for reconciliation. The security forces must be cleansed – “they are the protectors not death squads”. He feels there should be an international peace conference headed by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council along with other regional powers. In addition, Dr. Barzinji expressed his strong belief that Iran must be brought into this process and the international community should engage Turkey. Dr. Barzinji explained that Turkey has been marginalized; yet it is a powerful and important player in the reconciliation process. He went on to state that leaders of powerful countries must be seen engaging in dialogue; this would be influential in terms of changing the direction of events. In addition, the media has an enormous responsibility to cover the steps being taking to solve the issues of sectarian violence and misunderstanding. Finally, Dr. Barzinji believes that education is a key factor in the process of reconciliation – the educational systems in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere must be revised by purging the curriculums of hate rhetoric and misinformation about the other.

Imam Nahidian opened his remarks by clarifying the concept of Islam and the meanings of the words “Shi’a” and “Sunni”. Imam Nahidian stated that Islam is the peace and harmony of heaven and earth. He went on to explain, “in Arabic, “Sunni” means follower of tradition. All Muslims must be the Sunni or follower of the Sunnah or the tradition of the Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad. There is no other tradition for Muslims to follow and while all Muslims are the followers of the Sunnah, they must also be the “Shi’a” or the “party of” or “follower” of Aali Muhammad or Ahluh Bait which are the members of the Household of the Prophet Muhammad.” Imam Nahidian said that the Sunni and Shi’a people have lived together, in peace, for centuries. For both Sunni and Shi’a the pillars of the religion are the same: all followers make the same pilgrimage known as the Hajj, “and in the five daily salat or prayers, both Shi’a and the Sunni ask to bless Muhammad and Aali Muhammad. Therefore, every Shi’a is the follower of the Sunnah of the Messenger, which is connected with Aali Muhammed or the Household of the Prophet Mohammad.” The Imam explained that “there is a Hadith, saying of the Prophet Muhammad, which says “I am leaving to important things among you: The Book of Allah (Quran) and my Ahlul Bait (family members). If you stay with these two, you will never be in a lost state.”

The Imam told the audience that if a person does something wrong or ignoble, that the person should be held responsible and that all of Islam should not be blamed. He went on to explain that the Quran speaks of brotherhood, thus, if someone begins to think about violence or of killing another human being, they are not only not a Sunni or a Shi'a, but they are not a Muslim or even a human being. The Imam claimed, as did the other panelists, that for centuries Islamic scholars came together and reconciled the differences between Sunni and Shi'a. For Instance, Imams would invite their counterparts to speak at each other's mosques. This, the Imam believes, is one of the things that can help move Sunnis and Shi'a toward reconciliation. The Imam also made it clear that presently it is not the scholars who are fighting and in disagreement, but just as Dr. Barzinji stated, various and numerous occupations have caused the division we are seeing today – and these divisions are created along sectarian lines. Thus, one of the best ways to encourage the division and the hatred is to keep people separated. In addition, the Imam feels that the education young people are receiving today “fuels the fires” and he, like the others, believes the education system must be revised. In conclusion, the Imam reiterated that interaction, education and dialogue are the key ways to move towards reconciliation.

The entire panel agreed that when problems such as the large numbers of displaced persons and refugees, lack or low levels of education, economic disparities and extreme poverty, and lack of exposure to the ‘other’ are neglected by the leaders, historical grievances against one another become prominent. Politicians and elites exploit these grievances, contributing to growing distrust and fury. The panelist also agreed that democracy, as exported by the West, has not and will not take hold or work in most of the countries in the Middle East. Democracy, they agreed, is a “homegrown” concept and must evolve organically; they pointed out that two-thirds of the Muslim world lives in a functional democracy.

Finally, there was some disagreement about what types of peace conferences would be most beneficial in addressing and dealing with the violence and terror that is becoming an every day event, especially in Iraq. Dr. Barzinji reiterated his support for an international peace conference spearheaded by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and joined by other regional powers. Muhammad Faghfoory stated that international conferences inevitably end up serving the needs of those involved in the conference, but tend to disregard or lose sight of needs and interests of the country(s) for which they have gathered. The overwhelming message delivered by each of the panelist was that Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation is not only possible but already in the history and experiences of the people.